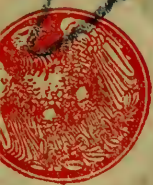


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KING ALFRED:



An Historical Drama.

BY

HENRY VAN RENSSELAER

AND

WILLIAM J. STANTON,

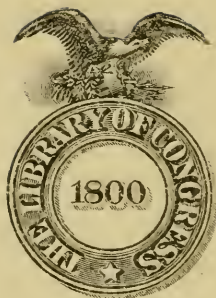
Of the Society of Jesus.



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The Music for the Songs in this play is for sale by the Publishers.

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KING ALFRED:
AN HISTORICAL DRAMA

IN FIVE ACTS.

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

KING ALFRED.

ATHELNOTH, *Earl of Mercia,*

EARL OF BERKSHIRE,

“ HAMPSHIRE,

“ WILTSHIRE,

“ SOMERSET,

} *Saxon thanes
faithful to
Alfred.*

CEOLWULF, *Earl of Northumbria,*

EDRIC, *Earl of Essex,*

} *Saxon thanes
conspiring
against Alfred.*

ASSER, *Bishop of Sherburne.*

EDWY, *page to Alfred.*

COLIN, *Saxon swineherd.*

GOTHRUN, *Danish prince.*

ARMUND, “ *envoy to conspirators.*

Danish lords, troops, scouts, etc.

Saxon lords, soldiers, attendants, etc.

KING ALFRED.

ACT I.

SCENE I.

Private apartment in Alfred's castle. PRINCE ALFRED seated at a table on which lie large books, manuscripts, etc. EDWY, his page, engaged in writing from dictation.

ALFRED. Thou sighest, little scribe; art weary grown?

Too long, perchance, I bend thee o'er thy task.
In truth, thou dost a man's endurance show
For toil; take heart, thy work will soon be done;
Then sport and gleeful chase of humming-bird
Or rabbit wild shall glad thee in the wood.

EDWY. Good master, let me linger by thy side;
Not tired am I, for I could write thy words
From dawn to dusk, yea, all the livelong night,
And never weary grow of serving thee.

ALFRED. I know it, boy; thou hast thy father's
soul.

Ah! well he loved the manuscript to scan,
And hold communion with those precious thoughts
Which slumb'ring lie in tomes like pearls in shell,

Waiting for one who, diving oft and deep,
 Should bring their treasure to the light of day.
 God's holy books he daily conned, and sought
 In our rude tongue their meaning to express.
 What joy for him to read the word thou'st writ,
 And find his thirst for lore in thy young breast!
 But to our task again, my gentle boy.

[ALFRED *dictates from Bible.*

"*Beatus vir qui timet Dominum*"—

"A blessed man is he who feareth God."

Write quickly, boy; the candle burns apace
 That I have set to mark the passing hours.

Enter Attendant, L. L.

ATTENDANT. Two thanes, my lord, crave audience
 of your grace.

ALFRED. Bid them approach. [*Exit Attendant.*
 (To EDWY.) What tidings can they bring?

Enter ATHELNOTH and SOMERSET, L. L.

ATHELNOTH. Hail, Anglia's king!

SOMERSET. Hail, Saxons' choice!

ALFRED. Sweet friends, amazement holds me
 bound;

I know not what ye would: the king still lives.

It cannot be that treason lurks beneath

Your speech and lures me on to perfidy!

SOMERSET. Alack! thy brother's noble heart now
 beats

No more responsive to his country's call.
Those wounds we deemed so light have set afire
The soul that was the life of all this realm.

ALFRED (*excited*). Why sooner came ye not, that
I might be

The close companion of his failing hours,
To pillow on my breast his drooping head;
To cool his brow and moist his parchèd lips;
To wipe from off his glazing eye the film
That death was spreading there; to speak those words
Which lift the shrinking soul beyond despair
And give it foretaste of the bliss to come !

[ALFRED *weeps*.

ATHELNOTH. Death all too sudden fell. For as
it chanced,

We spake of battles past and fields of fame;
The king upstarted with his wounds unscarred,
And, in the heat of val'rous thought, he burst
The scarfs which held the crimson tide that welled
From out the hurts which Danish swords had
wrought ;

And, in the outflow of his gen'rous heart,
He breathèd forth his soul.

SOMERSET. Yet lives the king !
For kings do never die. Hail, Anglia's king !
The star of Alfred radiant mounts the dark
Horizon of our land, made desolate
By foemen come from Norway's rugged shores.

ALFRED (*demurs*). Nay, noble earls, not fit am I
to wield

The sceptre death has wrested from the grasp
Of Ethelred; and weak to combat foes
Whom e'en his mighty valor scarce could check.

SOMERSET. Thy words, my liege, become thy
modesty;

Thy deeds in clarion tone give them the lie.
For thou hast proved thyself at Eschendune,
Where like a lightning-bolt thou hurl'd'st thyself
On Denmark's hosts and clav'st their ranks in twain.

ALFRED (*still hesitating*). But I am young in
years, and little skilled

To adjust the nice perplexities of rule,
To frame those laws which make a nation great.
Nay, rather seek for one whose wisdom speaks
In every act, whose prudence hath matured
Watching the changeful workings of the years.

ATHELNOTH (*loosens his sword-belt and offers sword*). My lord, in such a time, this sword cuts
through

All argument. 'Tis Ethelred's! He girt
Me with it when about to die, and bade
Me wear it till the hour I hailed thee king.

[ALFRED *still hesitates*.

Refuse it not; its lustre ne'er was dimmed
By aught save Daneman's gore; the rising hopes
Of loyal hearts, oppressed by foreign yoke,

Do turn to thee to wear it in their cause.

SOMERSET. Thy spirit's native majesty doth bid
Thee take thy royal brother's blade
And lead thy people on to victory.

ALFRED. I yield me ; who so base as not to glow
At touch of noble fire, which from the heart
Leaps out at mention of his country's woes !
When Heaven calls, man must obey. Come then
What will, I bow me to my destiny.
Give me that kingly steel (*girds on sword*). I feel
within

My breast the spirit of my sires burn,
And urge me on to deeds of high emprise.
Good thanes, go tell the nobles I accept
Their trust, and make ye ready for the war
That with its din will fright our land once more.

[*Exeunt Thanes, L. L. ALFRED turns to his books.*
Farewell, companions of my peaceful hours,
Your sweet society I now forego
For sterner comrades—helm and sword.
No more my pensive soul, on fancy's wings,
Shall soar beyond the things of sense—no more
Find philosophic rest beneath thy spell.

[*Gazes on them lovingly awhile.*

EDWY. And wilt thou leave me here among thy
books ?
Shall Edwy not become thy little squire ?
When on the march, I'll hold thy casque,

And woo thine eyes to sleep with low-breathed song.

ALFRED. Fair child, thy slender frame encom-
passes

But ill thy heart grown big with noble thought.

How could thy sapling form keep rooted life

Amid the riving blasts of rugged war ?

Stay sheltered for a while within these walls,

Till sturdy grown. Yet, ere I go, thou'lt sing,

What now I crave, some restful melody.

EDWY (*sings*).

Holy Mother, guard thy knight

Mid the storm and wrack of battle,

When the swords are red with fight

And the darts on armor rattle.

Holy Mary, maid unflecked,

From all ills thy knight protect !

When the faint stars softly light

Noble corses of the slain,

Holy Mother, grant thy knight

Lie not stark upon the plain.

Holy Mary, maid unflecked,

From all ill thy knight protect !

ALFRED. I thank thee, boy ; thy song will ring
above

The battle's roar and speak me words of hope.

Farewell ! Nay, Edwy, yield thee not to tears.

Heaven bless thee, child, and grant thee many years !

SCENE II.

*A Forest.**Enter Saxon Conspirators talking, R. U.*

CEOLWULF. Nay, Edric, speak no more ; I will
not brook

A stripling's rule. Shall we our trophies bring
And tribute pay to one who is a babe
In arms compared with our advanced estate?

EDRIC. Why, man, the fame of Alfred ringeth
through
The land since on that day at Eschendune,
Like blazing meteor madly rushing forth,
He on the Norsemen scorching fell and left
Them shrivelled on the plain, while in his tent
His royal brother lingered o'er his prayers.

CEOLWULF. If then his martial prowess dazzle
thee,
Go flutter round this new alluring light
Like silly moth which courts a fatal flame.
Go learn thy letters from this noble scribe,
Who better knows the scribbled page of books
Than temper of a sword. Go join the ranks
Of chanting clerks and pious praying monks,
And add your glory to the court of him
Who aims at grasping all the heptarchy.

[EDRIC starts.

But as for me, I'll never lay my crown

At this boy's feet ; and, at his peril, let
Him dare to catch at it !

EDRIC. Dost think he dreams
To strip us of our coronals, and merge
The several realms in one ? Can such supreme
Ambition dwell in breast so young as his ?

CEOLWULF. Aye, can and does. I tell thee,
noble prince,
That self-same Alfred will o'ertop us all
With craft that lackeys unto craven hearts.

EDRIC. What footsnare shall we weave to trip
him in
His upward march to sov'reignty ? A chief
Am I by native right and cannot stoop
To vassalage !

CEOLWULF. Well spoken like a lord
Of Saxon line.

ARMUND, *Dane, enters, L. C.* EDRIC *draws on him as*
an enemy.

Hold, Edric ! 'tis a friend.

EDRIC. A friend ! and yet a Dane ! Hath Æthiop
changed
His skin ? If so it be, then will I call
Him friend. What means this riddle, Ceolwulf ?

CEOLWULF. Its meaning's clear and easy to unfold.
You wish to hold your throne, here is the way :
Bold Gothrun, whom the Danemen call their king,
Hath sent his envoy now to treat with us.

EDRIC. What ! treat with us ! What compact
can there be

'Twixt Saxons and a Dane, 'save that which, writ
In blood, the sword-point forces on a foe ?

CEOLWULF. I grant that hitherto our fiercest strife
Hath been with alien hordes ; but now there lurks
A foeman, sprung of Saxon blood, more dread
Than open enemy. His name you ken.
Choose whether you will be a pygmy prince
Beneath his giant sway, or reign a king
Unshackled by his suz'rainty !

ARMUND (*breaks in*). Give ear.
My master Gothrun guarantees to leave
You independent lord of all your states,
Will you but join your ranks with his and make
A common headway 'gainst our common foe.

[EDRIC *hesitates*.

CEOLWULF. Wilt vassal be or king ?

EDRIC (*musingly, half aside*). I fain would rule,
Yet how endure to rule at such a cost ?
How turn my lance upon my country's breast
And reign through Danish grace, at price of blood
Of Saxons slain ? Yet can I bend me down
To vassalage ? With two opposing tides
My heart is vexed. One bears me onward to
A strand where many circle round a chief.
The other drives me headlong on a rock
Where I may walk supreme, yet ruin find !

CEOLWULF. Nay, be a man, and choose a manly
rôle

To play. Wilt reign or serve?

EDRIC. Methinks we rear

Our hopes on shifting sand—a Daneman's word.

(*Turns to ARMUND.*) What warrant can you give
of Gothrun's faith?

ARMUND. His oath by Odin and by Thor—the
gods

That rule Walhalla's hall. Nay, more: his son

Shall stand a hostage for my master's word.

[EDRIC *still hesitates, but seems moved.*

CEOLWULF. Why halt so long 'twixt such ex-
tremes as these,

Or reign or serve?

EDRIC (*aside*). Halfway I pause upon

The steps that reach unto a throne; shall I,

Now fearful, backward turn or higher mount

Till I attain the apex of my hopes?

(*Aloud.*) My choice I fix—my lot I cast: I reign!

CEOLWULF. Said like a king! Now, noble Dane,
Unfold your plans and speak your lord's behests.

ARMUND. Not here, good thanes, but in my tent,
where we

Can pledge success in lordly cups of wine.

EDRIC. Lead on, lest from my new intent I bend.

CEOLWULF. Lead on; our footsteps to a crown do
tend. [Exeunt.

ACT II.

SCENE I.

Swineherd's hut. ALFRED in peasant dress. An open hearth with fire on which cakes are baking. ALFRED sits mending bow and arrows; takes bow and says:

ALFRED. Good bow, the last remaining of my friends,

How often hast thou stood me in good stead !
With thee in many a glade I followed swift
The antlered monarch of the herd and twanged
The fatal shaft, that smote his panting flank
And laid him victim to the ruthless hounds.
But now my fate hath made me pitiful,
Since I, like hunted stag, have covert sought,
Escaping scarce from Danish foemen's darts
And barbs of trait'rous friends. They deemed me
dead,

For I was hid from sight amid the slain,
And only rose and dragged myself away
When gloom of night had veiled the battle-plain.
That night I made my couch on rushes dank,
Mid croaking frogs and hoot of hornèd owl—
Sole comrades of my fallen state. In dreams,
Once more I sat in council-hall with earls
Who vied in acts of courtliness. I waked—
To find myself an outcast and alone,

With hardly strength to crawl unto this hut,
Which, in the darkness, had unsighted stood. .

[*Smell of burning cakes. Enter COLIN, the swine-herd, sniffing the air.*

COLIN. Whew ! what's burning ? As I live it's them cakes as Margery set me to watch, and I set this lazy lout to mind. He's good for naught ! Look ye at this ! (*Shaking cake at ALFRED.*) A pretty barley-cake indeed ! This comes of your moping and mumbling to yourself the whole day long. Out upon ye ! Oh, my poor barley-cakes ! (*Wrings his hands.*) Oh, you stupid dolt !

ALFRED. Good Colin, chide me not ; I did forget—

COLIN (*interrupting him, and repeats sneeringly :*) "I did forget" ! Aye, that ye did ! Ye may forget to mind the cakes, but ye mind not to forget to eat them. (*Laughs at his wit. ALFRED, confused, goes to examine the cakes.*) Ye may mind your bow and arrows now, though what's the use of them I don't see. Ye idle mope.

ALFRED. Nay, Colin, I did bring thee home a buck The other day, which Margery did sell.

COLIN. She did, did she ? I dreamt of venison ! But she's a shrewd one. She kept it close from me. I'll be bound she's gone to gossip with some crones about a new gown, and left me here to do her work. Let her bide at home and bake (*mock courage*) ; I'll tell her so when she comes back. What's that !

(*starting at a sound.*) I thought I heard her footstep !
Let's hide away these tell-tale cinders before she comes.
Oh ! she's a terror when she's mad, and it doesn't take
much to set her going. Whew ! What shall I tell
her when she asks about her cakes ? (*Turns on*
ALFRED and says :) Come, you lazy clown, lend me
a hand to sweep up and make ready a new batch.

[*COLIN beats batter and ALFRED rakes the fire.*

COLIN. Throw some fagots on the fire ; it's nearly
out.

ALFRED. It smould'reth like my royalty nigh lost
Beneath the ashes of adversity.

Would I might fan my fortune's flame aglow
[*Blows on fire.*
E'en as I now these dying embers blow !

SCENE II.

Woods.

Enter ALFRED in peasant's dress.

ALFRED (*alone*). Oh, bitter bread dependence feeds
upon !

My only solace now is solitude.

I'd rather hungry go than share the crust

Begrudgingly bestowed by churlish hand

Mid gibing, shrewish words. Yea, sooner far

The trees shall be my roof, the herbs my food,

The birds and forest beasts my company.

O ancient oaks, your silence cheers me now,

Since tongue of shrew hath railed upon a prince!
You bow your lofty tops as though you felt
The insults offered to an unknown king.
Trill on, ye feathered choristers, your lays
Of thanks to Him who bounteous feedeth you!
Around me roam unharmed, O beasts who ne'er,
Like men, upon their fellows turn and rend!
How long, my country, shalt thou call to me
And find me impotent thy ills to stay?
When shall I meet again thy champions brave
And, backed by them, thy dying glory save?

[*Hears footsteps.*]

I hear the approaching tread of feet. Shall I
Withdraw or calmly wait to learn what news
They bring? (*Hesitates.*) Or friends or foes, I'll
bide them here.

Enter ATHELNOTH, BERKSHIRE, and WILTSHIRE.

They do not recognize ALFRED, but he recognizes them.

ALFRED (*aside*). My truest friends, although they
know me not.

I'll not reveal myself till first I learn
If they still loyal stand unto my cause.

ATHEL. Perhaps this honest fellow here can give
Us tidings of our hapless prince. (*To ALFRED.*) Good
hind,

Hast seen a noble warrior in these woods?
He's tall, and has the bearing of a king;

He's clad in armor full, is girt with sword,
And bears a bow; an azure feather from
His helmet waves. Say, by these tokens dost
Thou know the man?

ALFRED. Aye, such an one did pass
Some days ago.

ATHEL. Where is he now? Which path
Pursued he?

ALFRED. What will ye with him? Are ye
His comrades or his foes?

BERKSHIRE. His trustiest friends.
[ATHELNOTH and WILTSHIRE frown and make signs
to keep still.

ALFRED. God give you richest blessings for that
word!

[Undoes his smock-frock and removes beard. They
recognize him, fall and kiss his hand.]

ALL. 'Tis Alfred! 'Tis the king! Oh, Heaven be
praised!

ALFRED. Yea, Heaven be praised for noblest gift
to man—

Warm hearts of leal and loving friends in trial,
Whose genial currents ne'er congealèd grow
Neath biting blasts of chill adversity!

ATHEL. 'Tis well we met, for in these very
woods

The Saxon traitor thanes do now draw nigh
In quest of thee. Their troops do follow on,

Yet far behind these two, who hound-like press
Upon thy trail, too eager for their prey.

Hist! Even now they come! Conceal thyself.

[*They make motions to ALFRED to hide. He refuses,
and motions them to hide.*

ALFRED. Nay, rather hide yourselves. Oh, let
me face

These wreckers of my throne, and learn of them
Their treasonous intent!

ATHEL. Thou art unarmed,
And they are full equipped.

ALFRED. They'll know me not.
And should they on me draw, then come ye forth.

[*Motions them to hide. They do so.*

Enter CEOLWULF and EDRIC, R. L.

CEOL. Ho! clown, hast seen a haughty fellow
lurk

Within these shades? A stranger in these parts,
Upon whose head a royal price is set,
Which thou canst gain by opening of thy mouth.

ALFRED. There did a stranger pass along this
way.

Was tall?

CEOL. He was.

ALFRED. In armor clad?

CEOL. E'en so.

ALFRED. Was there an azure feather in his helm?

CEOL. The same. Thou know'st the man.
Here's gold (*offering money*); now lead
Us where he hides himself.

ALFRED (*dashes money on the ground*). He
hideth not!
He's here! [*Removes beard, while CEOLWULF pauses
in surprise, then draws his sword. ATHELNOTH
and Thanes rush out.*]

— ATHEL. Hold back, thou treach'rous fiend, hold
back!

Nor dare to draw thy crime-polluted blade
Upon thy king. [CEOLWULF *strikes at ATHELNOTH.*
*They fight. CEOL. disarmed and ATHEL. about
to kill him, when King interposes.*]

ALFRED. Nay, spare his Saxon blood,
Though he has lost all right to Saxon name.
Bind him, but let him live that he may taste
The mercy of the king he basely wronged.
[*They bind him. EDRIC in mean time has thrown
himself on his knees and asked for mercy.*]

Ah! Edric, little did I reckon that thou
Couldst steel thy heart to such a pass, as thus
To turn thy sword-point 'gainst thy country's breast,
And join thy forces with thy country's foe.

EDRIC. Too deeply I have wronged to crave for
life.

ALFRED. Yea, deeply wronged; but not so deep
my wrongs

But that my clemency can reach those depths.
Live, Edric, to atone thy woful fault,
And, battling for thy land in glorious fight,
With heart's blood wash thy shield to stainless white!

[ALFRED *raises* EDRIC *from the ground*.

[*Exeunt omnes*, KING ALFRED *first*.

SCENE III.

Forest in neighborhood of COLIN's hut.

Enter COLIN, L. L., ALFRED *and Attendants*, R. C.

COLIN. Hulloo! hulloo! Where's that mope gone?
(*Sees ALFRED, who is again in disguise.*) Oh, here
you are! (*Sees others and is put out a little, but takes
courage and says:*) Oh, you're a sharp one!

ATHEL. Peace, thou brawling churl!

[ALFRED *makes signs to keep still*.

COLIN. Oh, you did well to run away before
Dame Margery came home! You should have heard
the clatter that she made. Oh, how she stormed
when she went to look for her cakes! I didn't mean
to tell her, but I had to own that you had baked the
cakes so well (she didn't think it well) that there
was nothing left but cinders. If we hadn't thrown
them away, I'm sure she'd have ground them to
powder and made us drink 'em in water. Oh, it's
well for you you weren't there! Her fiery tongue
would have scorched you to a cinder as ye did her

cakes. I had to stand it all alone. She's calling for you now. Come back with me.

[*Takes ALFRED by arm and pulls him.*

ATHEL. What means this, knave? How speak you to the king?

COLIN. King! Who's a king? (*Thumping ALFRED.*) He's my dame's baker; she's got a batch ready for him now. He's pale; but won't she brown him when she warms him with her tongue! She's a fine woman, is Margery—but she has a tongue. Oh ho! [*Laughs.*

ATHEL. Enough of this! Down, churl, upon thy knees,
And sue for pardon and for life!

[*ALFRED throws off disguise.*

COLIN (*alarmed falls on his knees*). Oh, mercy, lawkamercy! Whoever would have thought it! Mercy, mercy! And didn't she say, "Lors! that fellow should be a king, he's fit for nothing else"? And Margery—whatever will become of her? Oh, I told her she scolded you overmuch. Oh, them barley-cakes will be the ruin of us! Oh, we're lost, lost, lost! Oh, oh, them cakes, them cakes!

ALFRED (*laughing, takes him by the hand and raises him*). Arise, good Colin; thou and I are friends, And fellow-sufferers too from thy dame's tongue; Yea, brother-bakers, sooth. Couldst bear to leave Thy home and Margery and warrior turn?

I'll dub thee baker to my soldiery.

[COLIN *grins and nods assent.*

Meet us a few days hence at Egbert's Stone.

(*Turns to Thanes.*) Good comrades all, let's speed us
on our way;

I see the dawning of a brighter day.

[*Exeunt omnes, L. U., save COLIN, who struts across the stage brandishing a club.*

COLIN. Come on, ye bloody foes! I'll lay it on ye. Faith! I'll be a bold lance. (*Voice heard calling "Colin."*) Oh, there's Margery shrieking after me! What'll she say? All my courage fails. How'll I ever tell her? And who'll mind the pigs? (*Cry repeated.*) Oh, I must face the foe! I'd rather face a hundred Danes than Margery when she's angry. But here's for it! I'll be bold!

- [*Straightens up, shoulders stick and marches, L. L.*

ACT III.

SCENE I.

Danish camp. Tent spread. Under it ALFRED with GOTHRUN and Danes. ALFRED disguised as a minstrel.

GOTHRUN. This merry bard so whiles away the
hours,
The day seems scarcely long enough, and night
Draws on too soon. Fill up a bumper, man,
Then sing another song. [ALFRED fills goblet.

DANES. So say we all.

ALFRED (*drinks, then sings*).

Fiercely the waters play
Lashing the prow,
As ships from Denmark gay
Steadily plough
Their course 'gainst wind and tide,
Past rocks and shoal,
Steadily, steadily
Making their goal.

At last they reach the coast
Rugged and white.
Boldly they make their boast,
Arm for the fight.

Forward the warriors rush
 In thickest fray,
 Bloodily, bloodily
 Win they the day.

Madly the Saxon bands
 Yield to the shock;
 Break they beneath our hands
 Like wave 'gainst rock.
 High o'er triumphant hosts,
 Flapping his wings,
 Victory, victory,
 Dark raven* sings.

[*They applaud song.* GOTHRUN *throws a bracelet to him.*

GOTHRUN. Here, minstrel, take the gift thy song
 hath won.

Whence comest thou? Why sang ye not before?
 How art thou called? 'Tis strange so sweet a bard
 Should hidden lie like dumb forgotten lute.
 Thy name?

ALFRED (*comes forward and takes bracelet; confused; knows not what to answer*). They call
 me Olaf; and my voice
 Was mute, unwitting that I had the skill
 To touch the chords of passion in thy soul.

GOTHRUN. - Thou erst hast been too modest of
 thine art.

* Raven was the Danish ensign, omen of victory, when by waving of the banner the wings appeared to flap.

Henceforth thou shalt at royal table sit,
And tune thy harp in Denmark's praise. Make room.

[*Seats ALFRED at table.*

My chiefs, we'll seat our minstrel here.

Enter Scouts from different quarters.

What news?

L. C. 1ST DANE. The Saxons are dispersed on every
hand.

R. L. 2D DANE. No army do they raise; their hope
is gone.

L. L. 3D DANE. Nor gleams a single blade against
the Dane.

GOTHRUN. No news is this; I guessed as much before.
Let's merry-make and rest secure. What need
Of armor when the foe's disarmed? Why watch
When foes stir not abroad? Why talk of war
When every wind doth murmur peace? To wine
And wassail, gallants all! And mind ye that
The common troop make cheer. A holiday
Proclaim for all who sailed from Norroway!

(They sing.)

Shout, shout for Denmark, ho!

Drinking to the raven.

Shout, shout for Denmark, ho!

We've conquered Saxons craven.

Reaphin, proud reaphin, bird of glorious omen;

Reaphin, proud reaphin, thou terror to the foemen!

We'll shout, we'll shout, we'll shout!

SCENE II.

*Forest-path. Thunderstorm.**Enter CEOLWULF, L. L. Dress disordered, and unarmed.*

CEOLWULF. I never thought to like the rumbling
roar

Of thunder-clap, nor in the lightning's glare
To find a friend to aid me in my dire
Extremity. Yet so it is ; and I
Do thank ye, jarring elements, that scared
Those craven minions of the upstart king,
That they, forgetting all save thought of life,
O'erlooked the captive they had basely made.
I'm free ! O joyful words to one who late
Was bound like slave with ignominious cords !
I'm free ! They'll rue my freedom, who themselves
Shall soon be bound ! Why, ev'ry drop of blood
Within my veins seems fired to goad me on
To seek revenge ! Ah, dastard Edric, could
I now lay hand on thee, 'twould heavy fall,
And press thy puny spirit from its home !
The body of a man indeed thou hast,
But quailing courage of a woman's heart.
I'm free ! Oh, scarce can I believe it true !
Two days and nights of bondage were to me

As many years. I, Ceolwulf, in chains !
Let me not muse on it ; 'twill drive me mad !

[*Grinds his teeth.*

Ha ! Alfred, thou hast not escaped me yet.
I'll have another thrust at thee afore
I die. Thou hop'st to reach thy end and clutch
Once more the crown. I'll snatch the prize from thee !
I'll rouse the Danes to fiercer, bloodier wars !
I'll stop at naught to bring about thy fall !
Magnanimous thou call'dst thyself, forsooth,
Because thou sparedst my life ! I thank thee not
For life in fetters vile ! Ha ! ev'ry wish
Of good I once did know is turned to hate—
Keen, poisoned hate ! I feel a very fiend
That thirsts to be revenged ! Revenge would be
As cooling drops to tongue that cleaveth to
The parchèd roof of mouth. I burn with hate !
All thought of mercy frightened flees from me ;
It shrivels as the lily does before
A fiery furnace-blast. Ambition ! thou
Hast turned me from a noble thane into
A furious devil mad with greed of power !

[*Sounds of thunder die away and sun comes out.*

Three Saxon Soldiers are seen advancing in pursuit. CEOLWULF gets a glimpse of them, and starts alarmed.

I see the Saxon sleuth-hounds on my track ;
(*Bitterly.*) I had forgotten that I was a hare
By beagles chased. What shall I do ? Where turn ?

If I advance, they'll sight me without fail.
 I'm spent and footsore, so I cannot lead
 The race and distance them ; unarmed, and one
 To three, how dare I stand and give them fight ?
 Where can I hide ?

[Looks around for a hiding-place ; sees a fallen tree ; falls down flat behind it, saying :

So low I'm brought, the dust
 I'm forced to taste, and, like this fallen oak
 That once did proudly rear its crest, to lie
 All prone upon the earth !

Enter, L. U., two Soldiers and COLIN, dressed as a soldier, between them.

COLIN (*looks around timidly*). Say, where's he gone ?

1ST SOLDIER. He can't be far away.

2D SOLDIER. Well, comrades, where's
 Our prisoner ? I'm sure I saw him.

1ST SOLDIER. Oh,
 He must be near.

COLIN. He can't escape us now.

[Patting his breast.

2D SOLDIER. What say you then to rest awhile ?

This trunk *[Pointing to fallen tree.*
 Invites us to a seat.

1ST SOLDIER. I dare not sit
 Until I lay my hands upon the man.

COLIN. He's good as caught—we're three to one.
(Tries to drag them to the trunk.) Come, sit.

1ST SOLDIER. No, not a moment's rest I'll take
before
That Ceolwulf is safely tied again.
He must have iron strength to burst the bonds
We bound him in. That thunder-storm will cost
Us p'r'aps our lives.

2D SOLDIER. Oh no ; the king is kind,
And could not punish us with death for such
An accident.

1ST SOLDIER. Unlucky accident
To let him slip ! Do what you like ; no rest
For me till he is trapped. [*Goes off*, R. L.

2D SOLDIER (*to COLIN*). We'd better go,
And then we'll share whatever's to be gained.
[*Exit*, R. L., 2d Soldier. COLIN *lags behind ; stands
just in front of the tree-trunk, trying to look very
martial.*

COLIN. I'm glad I didn't stay at home a single day
When once the king had asked for my stout arm
And stouter heart (*pats it*) to help him 'gainst the
Danes.

Faith ! he's a mighty prudent king that knows
A valiant man when he claps eyes on him.
Wouldn't Margery be proud if she could see
Me hunting, not for pigs that went astray,
But for that black-browed villain Ceolwulf !
I'd lay it on him (*brandishing pike*) if I had him here !
[*Goes to sit down on the tree, when CEOLWULF makes*

a movement and a sound. COLIN jumps up and bolts, crying :

The devil's here ! Oh, I'll be killed, be killed !

[CEOLWULF gets up and comes forward.]

CEOL. I breathe again. My body trembles yet
From dread suspense. I scared that fellow so
That he will never dare to venture back
This way. He'll scare the others too, so I
May follow safely on my road unto
The Danish camp. Once there, I'll raise
A tempest that shall burst in ruin on
The Saxon league ! Ha, ha ! I'll wreak my wrath
On all who dare oppose my throneward path !

SCENE III.

Camp scene. Moonlight. GOTHRUN and troops sleeping here and there on the ground. ALFRED awake.

ALFRED. Now sleep they all ; but not the peaceful sleep

Of those who rest from labors done, but like
The ravening beasts that feed and drink till they
Have sated grown, yet cannot bear to leave
The enticing bait while drop or fragment still
Remain. At length they drowsy fall and breathe
Through open mouths, as if demanding more.
Sleep on and take your fill, ye greedy curs ;
I'll give you food ere long to glut your fangs !

[*Sees EDWY asleep among Danes. Goes over to him cautiously.*

But who's that boy whose flaxen locks bespeak
A Saxon birth? Methinks I know the lad.

'Tis Edwy! Ah! how came he here mid foes?

I left him safe in castle strong secure.

I'll wake him. [*Shakes him gently.*

Edwy, wake, my little scribe!

[*EDWY rubs his eyes and half wakes.*

EDWY. Who calls? Must I so soon arise? I'm
tired.

Oh, let me longer sleep, for heavy fall

My weary eyelids down.

ALFRED.

Hush! softly speak,

For fear the sleepers thou arouse too soon.

I am thy master! Know'st thou not my voice?

EDWY. It cannot be! I'm dreaming still. Oh,
that

But once again mine eyes might gaze upon

My dearest lord! Would that mine ears might catch

The gentle words that used of old to fall

From his dear lips, like silvery chiming of

A sacring-bell.

ALFRED. Thou dreamest not, fair child.

See (*removes beard*), it is I, your loving lord and
king.

[*EDWY throws himself at ALFRED's feet and kisses
his hand.*

Quick, tell me what thou doest here, and how

Didst hither come. Why tarriedst not in keep
Of castle strong with troops engarrisoned ?

EDWY. Alack ! no fault of mine hath brought me
here.

Thy castle was besieged, and fell a prey
To cruel Danish hordes. My lady queen
And thy sweet babe did scarce with life escape ;
While I, a captive sad, was led to wait
Upon my new-made lords—to pour the wine,
And rouse by song their brutish apathy.

ALFRED. O woful tidings ! What ! My queen,
my child

Were hunted by these hounds—these dogs of Danes !
How shall I stay my hand, nor vengeance take
When now, like sotted beasts, they helpless lie !
Yet no ; forbid it, God, that I should strike !
The vengeance Thine. Thou wilt in time repay.
I'll meet them on the battle-plain, and there
Will force them mercy to implore of me
For all the ills and woes they brought this land.
Yea ! sleep secure, ye brutish alien hosts ;
Not sleeping men I'll touch, nor harm a hair.
But soon shall many fall into that sleep
From which there's no arousing. (*To EDWY.*) Come,
we'll haste

Away to Egbert's Stone, for there we'll meet
My warriors brave ere morrow's sun go down.
Then comes the fight for victory and my crown !

SCENE IV.

Egbert's Stone, Sherwood Forest.

*Enter, R. C., ATHELNOTH, BERKSHIRE, WILTSHIRE,
and other Thanes.*

BERKS. Is this not Egbert's Stone ?

WILTS. It is ; and this

The hour appointed for our meeting here.

ATHEL. And yet he cometh not ! Hath aught of ill
Befallen him ?

BERKS. Nay, Heaven forefend !

WILTS. I say

Amen with all my heart !

BERKS. And yet 'twas task

With too great peril fraught to penetrate
Alone into the hostile camp !

WILTS. How could

He e'er prevail on us to let him risk

So dear a life, when we were eager to

Endanger ours for king so true, so leal !

ATHEL. I swear by this my trusty sword, if they

Do harm one hair of Alfred's head, or spill

One drop of Alfred's blood, I'll call them to

So rich a reckoning, not all the heads

Nor veins of Denmark's warriors can e'er

Reprisals ample give for deed so foul !

Enter DORSET, SOMERSET, and HAMPSHIRE, R. L.

WILTS. Well met, good thanes, and doubly so
if word

Ye bring about our royal chief.

DORSET.

Hath he

Not yet arrived ?

SOMERSET. As soon the sun go down

At noon as Alfred break his plighted word !

BERKS. (*excited*). I see a gleaming spot among
the leaves,

As though the sun did glint upon a helm,

And nodding to the breeze an azure plume !

Thank Heaven, it is the king !

ALL.

The king ! the king !

*Enter, L. L., ALFRED, EDWY, et al. ALFRED greets
chiefs as they cluster round him.*

ALFRED. Brave hearts ! your loving loyalty hath
wrought

What anguish ne'er had power to work ; no tear

Hath veiled mine eyes till now, like summer shower,

They fall, though smiles the sun in cloudless sky.

Yea, joy effects what sorrow might not do.

But 'tis no hour for tears ! Exult we all !

Some days ago, in minstrel guise, I hied

Me to the Danish camp, and there mine eyes

And ears did learn that victory assured

Is ours.

[*Here the Thanes cluster around ALFRED, shouting
"Hurrah !"*

The boastful foe have laid aside

Their arms ; unharnessed now they sport as though

The land was theirs ; they deem that we do hide

Like frightened hares, too timorous grown to face
 Them ever in the field again. Without
 A sentinel their tents, without a scout
 Their hosts ; their steeds unbridled straying browse
 Beyond their heedless masters' call. Their troops,
 From king to meanest groom, mid revelling cups
 Have doltish grown. Their brains all steeped in
 wine

So with delusion reel, that all the wiles
 And art of war they've thrown aside with swords
 Now rusting in the sheaths. [*Derisive shouts.*

 My loyal thanes,
 The day now dawns that ushers in an age
 Of victory ! Our country piteous moans
 'Neath savage yoke. We'll hew it from her neck,
 And burn the fragments in atoning fires !
 We'll grind the foe with stones of castles they
 Have razed ! We'll hunt them through the fields
 They've desert made ! [*All shout, " We will !"*

 We'll harness them to ploughs
 For steers ! The remnant that escapes shall bear
 Our burdens, cut our wood, and water draw !
 Yea, loyal chieftains, now the hour speeds on
 When our dear land shall lift her bruised head,
 Her breast no longer feel the armed heel
 Of Dane ! Let's break like whirlwind on their camp,
 And rend and rive and hurl them into rout
 Like leaves to atoms whirled in wrathful blast !
 We timid hares will spring upon the throats

They've in their folly bared. My fancy sees
Them start and livid turn at sound of our
Death-bearing charge ! I hear the amazèd call
Of captains to affrighted men, who grope
For arms and mingle drunken curse with cry
For steed ; too dull to know a friend from foe,
They grapple madly with their fellow-Danes,
Allies become, and speed their own defeat !

[*All shout and flash swords.*]

ATHEL. Lead on, lead on ; we'll follow in thy lead !

ALFRED. Oh, well I knew your hearts would
echo back

Our country's call ! Strike off at once her chains !

To-morrow morn assemble with your clans

On Ethandune. Lord Athelnoth shall lead

The horse ; Lord Dorset shall the bowmen guide ;

You, Berkshire, head the slingers, while the pikes

Shall follow Hampshire's earl ; and, Wiltshire, thou

Command the spearmen bold ; Lord Somerset

Shall in reserve a chosen band retain.

And you, my lords (*to others*), the charges take that
these

Shall, on the morrow, give you in the field ;

While I will ride to every point and lend

My arm where'er the battle seems to lag.

The time is short. Go each unto his post.

But ere we part we'll knit our souls in one

Supreme embrace. Your hands, my noble earls !

Farewell ! The god of armies we invoke
 To aid us rend the Danemen's cursèd yoke !
*[All kneel on one knee in circle round king and raise
 swords.]*

ALL. Our swords, our lives, to country and to
 king,
 Our souls to God, we give in offering !
(Curtain falls on this tableau.)

ACT IV.

SCENE I.

*Wood. Battle going on ; confused sounds of shouting, etc. Sallies
 made across stage, L. C. to R. C.*

*Enter ALFRED and CEOLWULF fighting, R. L. EDRIC
 follows close on and interposes between ALFRED
 and CEOLWULF. Enter other Soldiers ; ALFRED
 drawn off in their rush.*

CEOLWULF. Thou craven-hearted knight, that
 durst not face
 Usurping prince without a plea for grace,
 I have thee now ! I'll grant thee grace, forsooth,
 But not thy coward life. So stand and strike !

[Makes pass at him.]

Thou castedst slur on me. I pay thee now.
 Take that, and that, thou rashly meddling knave !

[Makes lunges at him.]

EDRIC. O shame, a Saxon kinsman's blood to shed !
Yet traitor forfeits all his rights. Thou strik'st ?
Then look thou to thy heart, for thine heart's blood
Alone can wash such stain of infamy !

[*Mortally wounds CEOLWULF, who falls.*
Forgive me, God, so grim a deed ; and, thane,
Beg mercy on thy sin-bespotted soul !
[CEOLWULF dies. EDRIC, himself wounded, falls
fainting.

Enter ALFRED, by same side as he went off ; sees EDRIC.

ALFRED. What ! fallen, Edric ? Bathed art thou
in blood !

Unlucky chance that bore me from thy side
And left thee in my stead to fight so rude
A knight, twice perjured in his knightly oath !

[EDRIC looks as if he were dying.
But thou art stricken unto death ! Can naught avail
to stanch these wounds ?

[*Takes him in his arms and tries to bind up the
wounds.*

EDRIC (*speaking slowly and gaspingly*). 'Tis vain,
dear lord ;

My life-blood ebbs too fast. My task's fulfilled.
I've saved that life 'gainst which I dared to raise
A trait'rous hand. I've won me back the name
I erst did bear of Saxon earl. I've washed
My shield to stainless white in ruddy flow
Of blood that costs me life. Call me once more

Thy loyal knight and true — King — Alfred — ah !
[*Gasping.*

I die. O Jesu, mercy ! Mary, help !

ASSER, *who has been acting as chaplain to army,*
appears on scene, L. L.

ALFRED. Oh, haste thee, Asser ; noble Edric dies !
[*EDRIC dies in ALFRED'S arms ; ASSER bending over him. ALFRED covers him with shield after laying him down.*

Rest 'neath the shield thy blood hath bleachèd
white.

Rest endless grant him God in realms of light !

SCENE II.

Present the King and Soldiers.

Lords BERKSHIRE and SOMERSET rush in, L. C.

BERKS. My lord, my lord, the Danes, by Gothrun
led,

Do hotly press our central host. Our men,
Though stubborn, yield them inch by inch. Wert
thou

But there, thou couldst backward bend the front
Of Norse battalions madly rushing on !

SOMERSET (*peers through trees and exclaims*). The
Danish squadron makes this way, and from
The dust leaps forth a black-plumed warrior !

Swiftly he draweth nigh ! 'Tis Norway's prince !
He's here ! (*To ALFRED.*) My lord, this breast thy
bulwark be !

*Enter GOTHRUN and Danes, L. C. GOTHRUN turns
SOMERSET aside and runs him through.*

GOTHRUN. Block not my way, you mongrel cur ; I
seek the king !

ALFRED. The king seeks *thee* ! And here I stand
To meet and fight and wipe thee from the land !

GOTHRUN. Strike then, proud prince ; my sword
mine answer give !

The man whom Gothrun feareth doth not live !

[*They fight. GOTHRUN falls on one knee wounded ;
still fights. ALFRED knocks sword from his
hand.*

ALFRED. Dost mercy crave ?

GOTHRUN. No favor crave I from
A foe ! My life is thine ; do with it what
Thou wilt.

ALFRED. Not endless death I will for thee,
But life that lasts beyond this passing world !

[*Stoops and lifts him up by the hand.*

Live, Gothrun ! share the Christian heritage ;
Renounce thy heathen gods and rites profane,
And, at this price so benefiting thee,
Take back the sceptre thou hast lost, and, free
Once more, rule o'er thy people led by thee
Within the fold of Christ !

GOTHRUN (*amazed ; pauses awhile, then says*).

O Alfred, ne'er

Saw I such generous foe, nor thought that heart

Of man could show such magnanimity !

But oh ! too sudden is the change thou wouldst.

Grant me a space, howe'er so brief, to learn

That Christian faith which maketh gods of men !

ALFRED. What time thou wilt is thine ; nor over-
haste.

The holy bishop here (*pointing to ASSER*) shall to
thy mind

Unfold the saving truths. Good Asser, care

For him as though 'twere Alfred.

[*Exeunt ASSER and GOTHRUN, R. U. Sound of bu-
gles, etc. Saxon troops rush on, shouting "Vic-
tory !"*]

Enter WILTSHIRE.

WILTS. The Danemen flee on every side ! No hope

Have they ; their arms they cast away, their tents

Forsake ; no thought but flight. They turn against

Themselves, and to our cause conspire. So swift

They fly, 'twould seem that fright had given wings :

Our soldiers chase them to the very sea.

Their corpses homeward borne upon the main

Shall tidings give to friends of dire defeat !

*Enter ATHELNOTH, L. U., bearing a royal crown,
mantle, etc.*

ATHEL. Rich booty bring I from the sackèd
camp—

This royal crown and mantle for my liege.

ALFRED (*starts on seeing them*). It is the circlet
worn by Anglia's kings !

How fell it into Danish gripe ? Alack,

My castle fell a prey to enemies !

Thank God, my tender wife and babe escaped !

ATHEL. (*makes signs to a soldier*). We'll bid the
holy bishop Asser come,

(*To ALFRED.*) And here, upon the battle-plain, he'll
set,

Mid loud huzzas and acclamations proud,

The royal diadem upon thy head !

Enter ASSER.

ALFRED. Nay, not upon this blood-besprinkled
plain,

Where many a valiant knight and yeoman brave

Have gaspèd forth their soul in bitter pain.

(*To ASSER.*) But tarry yet awhile until sweet peace

Shall reign where now discordant war breathes forth

Its dying note ; then in our abbey church

In solemn form thou'lt me anoint and on

My forehead place the crown.

(*To lords, soldiers, etc.*) This day sennight

I bid you to the coronation-rite.

[*Exeunt, R.*

ACT V.

SCENE I.*

Chamber in royal palace. ASSER and GOTHRUN seated.

ASSER. Art ready now, my lord, to don the dress
Of neophyte, to gain the priceless gift
Of faith?

GOTHRUN. I little thought this stained soul
Might pure become as that of simple child!
The only law I used of old to know
Was that of wrong for wrong, and blood for blood.
The noble Alfred hath laid bare the law
Of love for fellow-men for Christ's dear sake.
Yes, Asser, I would cast my sinful self
In tide that washeth all the stains away.
Anew I'd live, forgiving and forgiven.

ASSER. Naught hinders then that thou this boon
shouldst gain.
Let's bear these happy tidings to the king.
Impatient he awaits, like one who, rich
Himself, would fain his treasures share; the pearl,
The precious pearl of faith, and jewels rare
Of grace, he eager longs that thou shouldst stretch
Thy hand and take unto thine own. Wilt go?

GOTHRUN. Yea, holy father, I no longer doubt;
So haste we to the lofty-minded prince. [*Exeunt, R.*]

* The first and second scenes of this act may be omitted on the stage.

SCENE II.

Royal chapel; font in foreground. KING ALFRED and Lords, etc. ASSER. GOTHRUN in white tunic.

ASSER (*standing by font*). What dost thou seek
of holy Church of God?

GOTHRUN. Faith, saving faith, most earnestly I
seek,

And swear by all the saints who reign above
That I renounce the devil and his pomps
And lying vanities! No more I'll wrong
The innocent—the widow, and the child
Bereft of parents' care. No blood I'll shed
Save in just cause. Mine enemies forgive;
My people rule in equity. So help
Me God! His Mother blest, and all the host
Of heaven—the angels mighty, and the just
Already perfect made—my sponsors stand!
'Fore them I raise and pledge my kingly hand!

ALL. Amen, Amen! A thousand times Amen!

SCENE III.

Cathedral. Throne prepared.

Enter long procession: Acolytes et al.; ASSER; Soldiers, Courtiers; LORD ATHELNOTH, bearing crown on a velvet cushion; LORD HAMPSHIRE, the royal mantle; LORD DORSET, the state sword; then Pages and the KING.

SOMERSET (*as king-at-arms*). Alfred, the son of
Ethelwulf the king,

And brother to our late chief Ethelred,
I here proclaim, in presence of you all,
To be the suzerain of all the heptarchy;
The lord of Essex, Wessex, and of Kent,
Of Sussex, Mercia, and Northumberland,
And of the Angles dwelling East. Long live
The king!

ASSER. In holy name of God, I ask
Of thee, most noble prince: Wilt thou here swear
To rule thy people as becomes a king
Who reigns as representative of Him
Who is the sovereign Lord of earth and heaven?

ALFRED. Yea, I do swear most solemnly to rule
As in the sight of Him who is the King
To whom I bow my knee, since from Him flows
All sovereignty. And here I pledge you all
That I devote my manhood's vigor, mind,
And body, to the welfare of this realm.
True justice I'll administer without
Regard to rank or privilege; and all,
From earl to serf, shall taste the blessings that
Arise from laws whose models are the laws
Of God and of our holy Mother Church.
In time of peace I'll be a father to
My people, and their friend. In war their chief
Who foremost leads the way, and in the front
He dies or, living, triumphs o'er his people's foes!

[*Shouts of, "Long live King Alfred!"*]

Kind friends, I fain would you outstrip in *deeds*,

For words are feeble to express the thoughts
That swell within my mind, aroused by your
Sore-tried and valued loyalty. For you
I live, be God my witness and my aid!
(*To ASSER.*) And now this royal crown and mantle
bless,

And pray I wear them both in righteousness!
[*The Bishop places the crown on his head and the
mantle upon his shoulders. People again say,
“God save the king!” and sing hymn:*

Hail! hail! all hail! all hail!

Hail, prince who now returnest
Triumphant o’er thy foes!

Hail, eager heart that burnest
To soothe thy country’s woes!

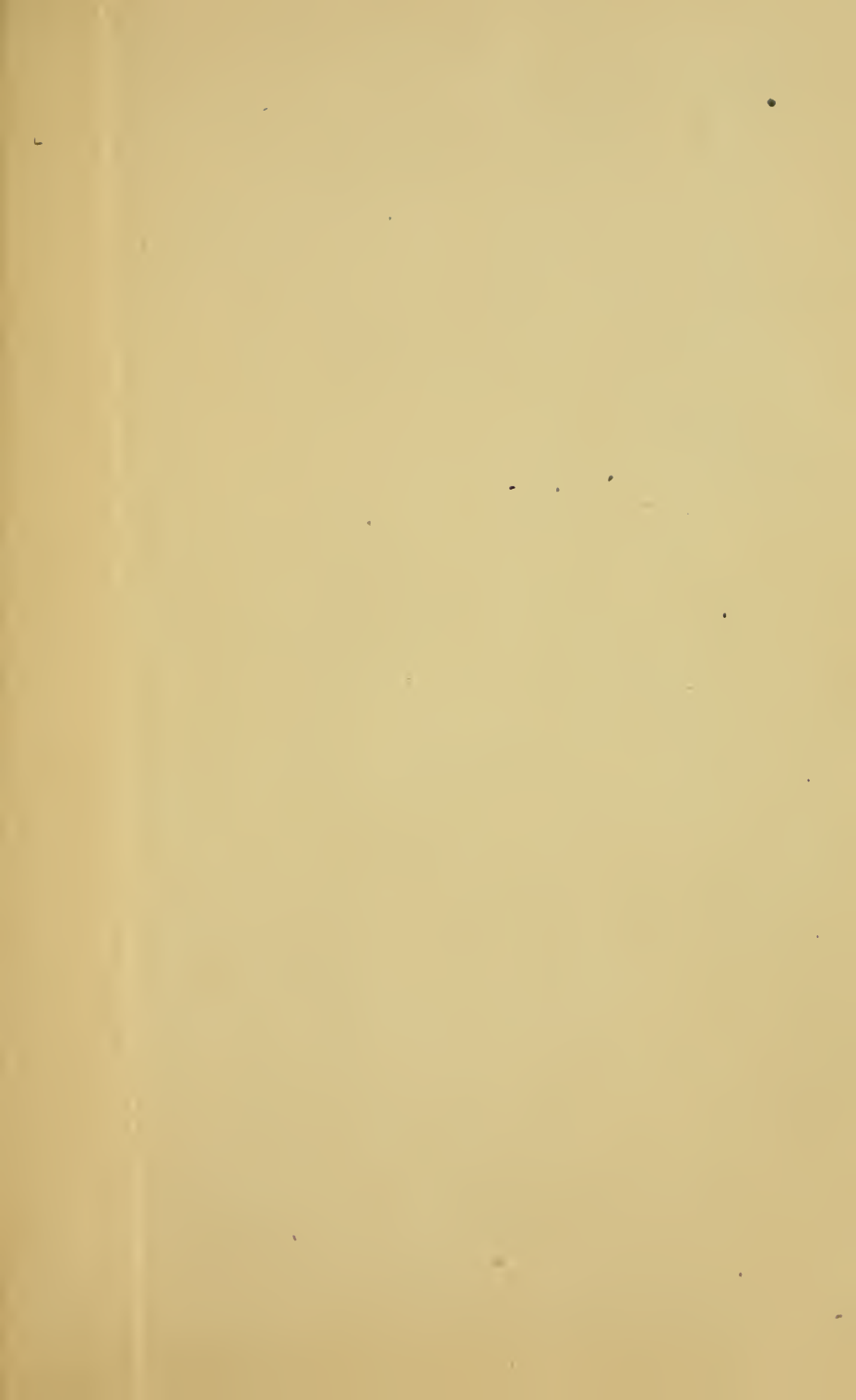
Hail, Alfred, who enthrallest
Our hearts but free’st our hands!

Hail, warrior who appallest
The foemen of our lands!

Hail, Alfred, who hast freed us
From Denmark’s savage horde!

God bless our king! God speed us!
God save our true liege lord!

Hail! hail! all hail!



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